Forget the Font, Draw it Yourself.

Perhaps as a backlash to our digital lifestyles, hand drawn type is making a comeback. Design expert Steven Heller explores the history of hand lettering, while we profile 6 creatives who draw type as illustration.

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It's tempting to equate hand lettering with hemlines. The fashion goes up and down, in and out, depending on all sorts of socio- and techno-factors. Currently, hems are up *and* down, and type and lettering enjoy resurgences in classic as well as ad hoc or artistic hand lettering. But it's nothing new, really. Centuries before the computer, artists and artisans used a very complex tool for making letterforms—their hands. At five digits per hand it was the first digital lettering tool.

We all know that letterforms in all shapes and sizes were drawn, carved and engraved using this tool. And even allowing for its technological quirks, the hand created some of the most beautiful lettering ever.

For at least a decade, however, there has been a renaissance of the hand. Of course, this isn't to be confused with the kind of precision drawing that master type designers honed as wee lads and lassies, but rather it's possibly a reaction to reflexive precisionist sensibilities that are made so easy by the computer. Or maybe it's just an aesthetic whose time has come—back.

Although drawing on the computer is perhaps no less complicated than on paper, the logic inherent in the new tool nevertheless eliminates the serendipitous edge that is endemic to the old one. But there are other distinctions. Typesetting is official; hand lettering is informal. Typesetting is mechanical; hand lettering is expressive. These days, just the word "expressive" connotes liberation from the confines of technology, even though it may only be an illusion.

Nonetheless, historical rumination is useful to illustrate where hand lettering came from and where it's going. During the early 20th century, typographers and type designers produced precisionist lettering by hand because time, technology and economy demanded it. When photostats were too expensive or slow, hand lettering was the cheapest and quickest way to create a custom headline for a book jacket, poster or point-of-purchase display. To expertly hand letter in the "old days" was the same as mastering InDesign or Photoshop today.

To admire a virtuoso of this form, just view lettering created in the 1920s and 1930s by William Addison Dwiggins for his book spines and title pages (and even his lesser book jackets); they were flawless specimens. Dwiggins' work was more formal than informal because his books were designed to stand the test of time. Yet there were other designers engaged in ad hoc writing simply as a respite from the rigor of traditional typography. It was fairly common for designers to use brush and pen-scrawls as display lettering-cum-personal signature. Paul Rand frequently used a light-line, hand-drawn script instead of conventional type to give advertisements the informality necessary to intimately engage the audience and signal a casual rather than institutional sensibility.

Posters produced by the 1968 French radical student design collective Atelier Populaire never contained real type but instead such phrases as "Fascist Vermin," "Order Begins" and "We Are the Power" violently inscribed by a designer's hand, which underscored the polemic import of each message. There was also a more aesthetic side practiced in the United States by psychedelic poster artists who fashioned meticulous hand-rendered lettering based on the resurrections of old Victorian wood- and Art Nouveau metal-types. Victor Moscoso, who helped mastermind psychedelic alphabets, rendered the negative spaces between letters rather than the positive letters themselves as a means to create vibrating sensations. Every detail was achieved by hand because it was necessary to maintain total control to achieve the typographic optical illusions that he invented. Moreover, there were no technologies available that could match his obsessive artistry. As a radical style, psychedelic lettering didn't last long, though hand lettering continued to be popular throughout the '70s and into the '80s.

With the introduction in the late '80s of the Macintosh computer as graphic design's primary tool, hand lettering diminished as an overall conceit. Type designers scurried to adapt old typefaces for the new digital platforms as they experimented with bitmapped and high-res concoctions, which led to a postmodern typographic style rooted in new traits such as degradation and distortion. Nonetheless, a unique phenomenon arose that married hand lettering concepts together with high-tech digitizing software. Ironically, the scanner and digital camera have made it easier to use hand lettering that's painterly and abstract. The computer's ability to digitize anything is phenomenal. But digitization inevitably results in mass production, and mass production invariably removes the quirkiness from any letterform. How can someone claim to be eccentric when two or more designers are using the same packaged expressionistic lettering?

The hand offers serendipitous expression that speaks personally. Hand lettering enables a designer to make a distinct mark. Although a computer can be programmed to reproduce the quirks and idiosyncrasies of humans, it won't spit out something that has a sublime watercolor scrawl. Nor will it credibly produce the transcendent messiness of the brush marks or scratchy doodles. And it will certainly not replicate the words carved into wood or other malleable surfaces. Although a good programmer could train the computer to do almost anything, why bother?

As design becomes more computer-generated, as programmed special effects are increasingly integrated into the designer's vocabulary, the human factor must not be underestimated. The hand is graphic design's oldest tool—and for now it's also the best alternative to formulaic solutions.

Steven Heller, co-chair of the MFA Designer as Author program at The School of Visual Arts, is the author of more than 120 books, including "Design School Confidential" (with Lita Talarico) and "Handlettering" (with Mirko Ilić). He writes the "Visuals" column for The New York Times Book Review and The Daily Heller. www.printmag.com/dailyheller; www.hellerbooks.com